SATURDAY REVIEW

SOC4-01.2 Piercing the

Cloak-and-Dagger History

**Piercing the Reich:
The Penetration of Nazi Germany by American Secret Agents During World War II**
by Joseph E. Persico
Viking, 376 pp., $14.95

Reviewed by
James Sloan Allen

THE ALLIED ARMIES were closing a vise on Nazi Germany from east and west. Hitler, shaken by the bomb attempt on his life in July, had sunk into paranoid distrust of his subordinates and mad determination to win Final Victory. The Third Reich was doomed. But no one could say when or at what cost the end would come.

To hasten the inevitable, the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) spirited agents for the first time into the enemy's heartland, beginning with a parachute drop through the night sky of September 2, 1944. The assignment: to find facts. How many troops remained and where were they moving? Where were the factories and what were they producing? What material resources were running short? How was civilian morale? Who were the local Nazi officials? How was Germany to be defended and what plans existed for a last-ditch stand in the Austrian Alps? During the last eight months of the war, 102 missions of the OSS secretly penetrated the crumbling but resistant Reich in search of answers.

Joseph Persico understandably wrings all the drama from this history that he can. Among the first to read the declassified documents disclosing these events, Persico revels in his discovery of real-life cloak-and-dagger doings: the disguise and forgery center in England, which gave agents new identities; the infiltration of German cities (including Berlin), factories, and even the military and intelligence service; the ill-fated missions tripped up by amorous liaisons, betrayals, and accidents.

The adventures read like a Helen MacInnes anthology, lacking perhaps the grace of style and finely orchestrated suspense. Or like ideas for film scripts—and some gripping cinematic thrillers should come of them. But for all the book's arresting moments, it fails to achieve either sustained dramatic power or solid historic significance.

Persico offers more a collection of incidents than a coherent and compelling history. All of them follow a short, fixed pattern: recruitment of the

Joseph Persico—Naively caught in the intrigue.

agent, infiltration of Germany, successful assimilation and information relayed, or detection and captivity. To vary the scheme, Persico shifts back and forth between missions, but a sense of repetition remains and confusion results. What is more, Persico glosses over significant and potentially dramatic details. The first agent to arrive, for example, "had a galvanizing effect on the moribund anti-Nazi movement in the Ruhr," having within a month, besides his other assignments, become leader of a resistance organization spread across the Ruhr and linked to distant cities like Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Berlin, "ready to launch an armed uprising." No mean accomplishment for a novice spy. But how he managed it remains enveloped in mystery, as does the character of the indigenous resistance he was to exploit.

Yet Persico's collection of adventures does not lack historical importance. The author properly believes the book illuminates the "late but brilliant flowering" of American "secret warfare." Unfortunately, he misperceives what this illumination reveals.

America had no intelligence-gathering organization before the summer of 1941, when FDR called war hero William Donovan to set one up. To Persico's boyish admiration, Donovan and kindred spirits like Allen Dulles, David Bruce, and Richard Helms "achieved in less than four years what other nations had developed over centuries." This naive praise—should spying require centuries to learn?—betrays Persico's uncritical eyes and resulting blindness to the true import of his book. That import lies in the deliberate creation of an intelligence establishment as a mysterious and untouchable organ within American government.

From the start, under the influence of Donovan's flamboyant style and "ravenous curiosity," the secret service acquired a cachet and privileges unknown to other services. It was an elite corps of intellectuals and adventurers whom the psychologist Henry Murray, hired as a consultant, saw uniquely and dangerously drawn to spying. "The whole nature of the functions of the OSS," he said, "was particularly inviting to psychopathic characters; it involved sensation, intrigue, the idea of being a mysterious man with secret knowledge." The very concept of "intelligence," as embodied by the OSS, set spies above the law. "A man should not have too many ideals," read a training manual, he "should work with his intelligence rather than his heart....The ends justify *any* [sic] means." Persico reverently records these telling statements, uncritically capsuling the entire spirit of the OSS in the words of an agent proud of being "a burglar with morals"—morals which, however, were determined by the agency.

That the troubled recent history of the American intelligence establishment arose from the personalities, principles, and practices of its early leaders seems lost on Persico. Like those leaders, he delights in intrigue for its own sake. And what of the accomplishments of these intrigues? The British thought the venture into Germany pointless, since rich intelligence information poured constantly into Allied hands through German messages decoded by the ultrasecret "Enigma" machine. But the OSS pushed ahead, as Persico admits, partly from a desire "to outdo the master," the British, from whom they were learning the trade. Persico presents no persuasive evidence that piercing the Reich accomplished much beyond satisfying the OSS leaders' ambitions for prestige. Many agents were caught, others lost their radios and couldn't communicate, others had nothing of value to send. Some of those who succeeded, like Frederick Mayer, who assisted in the Austrian surrender, did so because the defeated but still ingenious enemy invited them to serve as intermediaries with the victors. The best intelligence information by far still came through "Enigma" and disaffected Germans unconnected with the operations studied here—most notably Fritz Kolbe, who carried top-secret papers to Allen Dulles in Switzerland for years.

Persico lamely concludes of the information gathered by the missions into Germany that "some of it was ridiculous

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heated discussion. Finally, at 5:22 p.m., the Pan Am pilot on our plane spoke over the loudspeaker: "Ladies and gentlemen, what would you say if I told you we were about to take off?"

The plane erupted with shouting and cheering. Immediately, the captain taxied down the runway and, without so much as a pause, wheeled the jet around and zoomed into the air. So fast was the takeoff that one steward got caught in midplane holding a bag of ice and was catapulted down the aisle. someone grabbed him and guided him back to his seat.

About an hour later the captain announced, "We are about to leave Iranian air space." Cheers again erupted. The captain started to count down the nautical miles: "Five, four, three, two, one, bingo."

People cheered so hard the plane seemed to shake. Some cried with joy. Immediately, one wag put up a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini with the caption "Would you buy a used car from this man?" One man started singing, "Deck the halls with boughs of holly."

Passengers took up a collection for the crew, and the crew used the money to start an emergency fund to help other evacuees. The liquor flowed all the way back to Rome, where we disenbarked about five hours after takeoff—a little high, terribly tired, happy to be on the way home.